

Dear Reader,

What is love? Each time we experience a sense of regained comfort, after having been uncomfortable, we also experience a moment of positive feeling toward whomever has provided relief from the discomfort. An infant who has been fed, a child who has been taken to the playground, a man or woman who has been given a gift...all will associate the positive feeling they have with the person who has caused it.

Each moment in time is registered in the memory, with all of its component perceptions categorized in their respective pathways. Just as there are pathways composed of memories of milk, playgrounds, and gifts, and a pathway of the feeling of regained comfort (the precursor to what can become one's Inner Guide), so, too, there is a pathway of feelings of positive regard, or affection. This pathway is associatively related to the memory pathways of each individual who has provided comfort.

As an infant develops, it experiences many moments of regained comfort. Being fed when hungry, changed when wet, and rocked to sleep when tired, all restore comfort. When a caretaker talks to a baby, plays with it, or provides toys, the discomfort caused by understimulation is ended. Comfort is also restored when a child is protected from situations that cause overstimulation, such as a party that gets out of hand, or too many extra-curricular activities. Sometimes, a child doesn't understand, or doesn't want to acknowledge, that protection is necessary; and he may become angry with the caretaker for depriving him of something that he thinks he wants. But, out of awareness, he is relieved, and the caretaker's intervention is associated with the feeling of positive regard.

Sometimes, a caretaker misjudges. She may not understand that her baby needs more interaction, or that her child is overstimulated. Whenever she causes a deviation from the optimal stimulus level, the resulting disequilibrium in her child is associated with a negative feeling toward her. (I am reminded of the time years ago when my young son informed me that I had put him in a Procrustean bed.) No caretaker is perfect, but usually, the child's experience is predominantly positive.

Each instance of regained comfort is a unique experience, because no two situations are exactly identical. The greater the number of such experiences, and the greater their variety, the larger the mental network of associations becomes. Each time a new experience of regained comfort with its accompanying feeling of affection occurs, the entire network of associations is also stimulated. The greater the network of associations, the richer and more intense the feeling of affection is.

Is there a qualitative difference between liking and loving? No. As the intensity of affection increases with the increasing number of instances of regained comfort, liking develops into loving.

When an individual has received all that she needs, and yet receives more (her cup overfloweth), she can handle the excess by returning some of it. The mental apparatus of the baby who is overstimulated by the intensity of her caretaker's love handles the excess, in part, by loving back. The baby who smiles at her parent is often not just expressing her own pleasure; she is providing love in return.

Usually, the figures that provide the greatest number and variety of experiences of regained comfort are the parents. As a person develops, it is natural for him to feel attracted to people with similar characteristics. When an adult first becomes interested in a potential partner, it is because he perceives that person as possessing some of those desired characteristics. (When an individual's experience of the parents has not been predominantly positive, his or her love life becomes more complicated.)

As a relationship develops, it will flourish only if each partner is able to understand what the other needs in order to maintain an optimal stimulus level. Otherwise, a couple may stay with each other, attached by the resemblances to their parents, but they won't be able to provide comfort to each other. This is not an all-or-none thing, but the more able each partner is to help the other, the warmer, richer, more intense and more satisfying their relationship will be.

Clearly, the key to success in providing comfort to another lies in understanding what he or she needs. In a recent Letter, I described how parents can best raise a child: by understanding what the child needs. The same is true for loving a partner. And as with child rearing, the best way to be a good partner is to develop one's Inner Guide. An Inner Guide knows our partner even better than we do, because it has access to our entire memory bank, and its capacity for subliminal perception enables it to assess our partner's stimulus level. And, because it can tap all of the knowledge in our memory, it can provide responses and solutions that we would never have thought of ourselves!

QUESTION:

Several readers have asked whether self-hypnosis might result in the unleashing of a negative force.

ANSWER:

No. Self-hypnosis develops what you wish and ask for. In doing self-hypnosis, we begin by saying to ourselves (not repeatedly, only once) that we want our Inner Guide to grow and develop. As the Inner Guide is composed only of the pathway of comfort, a sense of its own identity, and the wish to help us, it can only do good things for us.

I welcome your questions and comments, and will publish as many of them as possible. I look forward to hearing from you, either by post or at info@davis-foundation.org. If you would like to be anonymous, just let me know.

Cordially,

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